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Ab Imperio, 4/2016, pp. 155-183 (Article)

Published by Ab Imperio

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/imp.2016.0089>



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**Matthias BATTIS**

**THE ARYAN MYTH AND TAJIKISTAN:  
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Although infamous as part and parcel of Nazi race ideology and dubbed an “Aryan myth” by Léon Poliakov,<sup>1</sup> the idea of an Aryan race continues to figure prominently in nationalist discourses in various countries, including India and Iran.<sup>2</sup> The government in Tajikistan went so far as to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of national independence in 2006 with the proclamation of a “year of the celebration of the Aryan civilization.”<sup>3</sup> This and related propaganda efforts reveal the centrality of the idea of the Tajiks’

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\* This article is based on the paper presented at the seminar “Boundaries of History” at HSE St. Petersburg on December 8, 2016. Support from the Basic Research Program of the National Research University Higher School of Economics is gratefully acknowledged. The author would like to thank Alexander Morrison, Alexander Semyonov, the editors of *Ab Imperio*, and two attentive anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestion.

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance: Christopher Hutton. *Race and the Third Reich: Linguistics, Racial Anthropology and Genetics in the Dialectic of Volk*. Cambridge, 2005. P. 80; Léon Poliakov. *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*. New York, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Romila Thapar. *The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics* // *Social Scientist*. 1996. Vol. 24. No. 1-3. Pp. 3-29; Reza Zia-Ebrahimi. *Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the “Aryan” Discourse in Iran* // *Iranian Studies*. 2011. Vol. 44. No. 4. Pp. 445–472.

<sup>3</sup> *Jumhuriat* [Republic] (Tajikistani governmental daily newspaper). 2006. September 14. P. 1.

Aryan descent for the contemporary Tajik nationalist discourse.<sup>4</sup> The present study examines the origins of this idea in the early twentieth century and argues that Tajikistan's imagining and formation as a nation-state is inextricably linked to the way it was articulated by imperial scholars-turned-Soviet orientalisks,<sup>5</sup> such as Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Semenov (1873–1958).

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“For our ancestors, the Aryan civilization marked the beginning of history [*oghozi ta'rikh*],” proclaimed the president of Tajikistan in 2006.<sup>6</sup> His words illustrate the basic function of the ancient Aryans, namely, to confer on those evoking them the status of indigenosity and autochthony.<sup>7</sup> Poliakov has described the Aryan myth as the expression of an urge that is common among various human groups, “namely that of claiming a distinctive origin, an ancestry which is both high-born and glorious.”<sup>8</sup> The Tajiks' Aryan ancestors serve the same political purpose and feed the same urge.

Contrary to what nationalist ideologues like to suggest, the origins of the Aryans lie not in time immemorial but in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European scholarship. The idea of an Iranian Aryan race, for example, rather than being rooted in the ancient appellation *ariya*, as is often claimed, is in fact “a re-import into Persian of the European concept of ‘Aryan,’” as Reza Zia-Ebrahimi has argued.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the intellectual genealogy of

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<sup>4</sup> According to Sergei Abashin, the Aryan theme is “one of the most important symbolic assets of Tajik nationalism.” See Sergei Abashin. *Natsionalizm v Srednei Azii: v poiskakh identichnosti*. St. Petersburg, 2007. P. 202.

<sup>5</sup> I am calling Semenov an orientalist in both the conventional and the Saidian sense. He was an orientalist because he was professionally engaged in the academic study of the history of the Muslim societies of Central Asia. He was also an orientalist insofar as he was a representative of both Russian imperial and Soviet rule in Central Asia and, as such, located right at the heart of the nexus of the exercise of imperial domination and production of “colonial knowledge” that Edward Said has identified (see Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. New York, 1979). Like British colonial administrators and orientalisks in India, who assumed that the “society ... they were governing, could be known and presented as a series of facts,” and “that administrative power stemmed from the efficient use of these facts,” Semenov wished to see orientalist scholarship applied to make colonial rule more efficient. See Bernard S. Cohn. *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton, 1996. P. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Jumhuriat*. 2006. September 14. P. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Victor Shnirelman. *Aryans Or Proto-Turks? Contested Ancestors in Contemporary Central Asia* // *Nationalities Papers*. 2009. Vol. 37. No. 5. P. 569.

<sup>8</sup> See Léon Poliakov. *The Aryan Myth*. P. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Reza Zia-Ebrahimi. *Self-Orientalization*. P. 446.

the Tajiks' Aryan ancestors can be traced back to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European and especially Russian scholarship. According to Marlène Laruelle, late nineteenth-century Russian Oriental studies "had developed a very clear 'tajikophily' and 'ariophily' that was denounced by key figures of Turkology such as Vassili Bartol'd (1869–1930)," and which was subsequently refined by Soviet scholars, such as Bobojon Gafurov (1908–1977), to prove the autochthonous status of the Tajiks in Central Asia.<sup>10</sup>

Another key actor in this context was Aleksandr Semenov, who was an influential proponent of the hypothesis of the Tajiks' Aryan descent, a pupil and friend of Bartol'd and an early academic mentor of Gafurov. Born in the Tambov province in 1873 into a merchant family of Tatar ancestry and modest means, Semenov graduated from Moscow's Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages in 1900 to embark on a remarkable career in the colonial administration of Russian Turkestan. The revolution in 1917 forced him to reinvent himself as a Soviet orientalist and occasional government adviser on various cultural and educational affairs in Central Asia. Having spent most of his life working in several leading academic institutions in Tashkent, in 1951 Semenov followed the invitation of his former student and now first secretary of the Communist Party of Tajikistan, Gafurov, to move to Stalinabad (Dushanbe) and become the director of the Ahmad Donish Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of Tajikistan's newly established Academy of Sciences.<sup>11</sup>

Semenov remained in this post until his death in 1958, when the former colonial administrator became unequivocally canonized in the pantheon of Soviet academia. His biographers (and students) Boris Litvinskii and Nariman Akramov have described him somewhat euphemistically as "one of the most distinguished Soviet orientalists of the old generation," thus reminding us of the fact that Semenov had played a prominent role both under the ancien régime and the Soviet state.<sup>12</sup> But his career should be of interest to scholars of the late imperial and early Soviet periods not just because of its

<sup>10</sup> Marlène Laruelle. *The Return of the Aryan Myth: Tajikistan in Search of a Secularized National Ideology* // *Nationalities Papers*. 2007. Vol. 35. No. 1. P. 55.

<sup>11</sup> This article is based largely on materials held in Semenov's personal archive and library at the Ahmad Donish Institute. References to this archive are marked "A.A.S., bx, fy," meaning: Archive Aleksandr Semenov, box x, folder y.

<sup>12</sup> Semenov's biography was published in Moscow in 1971. Its editor in chief was none other than Gafurov, by then the director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the USSR's Academy of Sciences. See Boris Litvinskii and Nariman Akramov. Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Semenov. *Nauchno-Biograficheskii Oчерk*. Moscow, 1971. P. 3.

prominence, timing, and duration but also for its locality: Semenov lived and worked in Central Asia for six decades, participating in the region's transformation from a colony of the Russian Empire into a part of what Francine Hirsch has called an "Empire of Nations."<sup>13</sup>

In Hirsch's vein, this article argues that Semenov was part of a "revolutionary alliance" of former imperial scholars and the Bolsheviks that was based on "a shared appreciation for scientific rule."<sup>14</sup> It is telling in this respect that since 1918 he was regularly in touch with the Indologist and permanent secretary of the Imperial Academy of Sciences Sergei Ol'denburg,<sup>15</sup> whom Hirsch regards as a central figure in this alliance.<sup>16</sup> Unlike Hirsch, I think that Semenov joined this revolutionary alliance not out of interest in "scientific government" or the Bolsheviks' efforts to modernize and transform society, but in order to pursue his own research interests. Rather than focusing on groups of scholars, as Hirsch has done, this article takes the microhistorical perspective of singling out one exemplary biography. The case of Semenov highlights the context-setting effect of the imperial situation that unpredictably transformed initial meanings and intentions of the Bolshevik nationalities policy. More specifically, through the lens of a single life, this study explores how certain academic fashions and paradigms and Semenov's determination to continue his research and protect its object (Persianate Central Asian culture) influenced the local Central Asian dynamics of Soviet nationalities policy.

The article's focus on the continuity throughout the divide of 1917 (including the evolving Aryan theme) resonates with Vera Tolz's and Adeeb Khalid's argument about the need to see Soviet nationalities policy in the context of discourses on nationhood and ethnicity that were articulated by Russian and Central Asian elites during the late imperial period.<sup>17</sup> By the same token, the article is distanced from the research agenda of the Early Soviet studies of the turn of this century. Thus, it will not discuss how and why the Bolsheviks were promoting "the national consciousness of ... ethnic minorities and establishing for them ... institutional forms of the nation-

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<sup>13</sup> Francine Hirsch. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* P. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Correspondence between Semenov and Ol'denburg is held in the St. Petersburg Branch of the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences: Fond 2. Op. 1-1918. No. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Francine Hirsch. *Empire of Nations*. P. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Vera Tolz. *Russia's Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods*. Oxford, 2011. P. 135; Adeeb Khalid. *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*. Berkeley, 1998. P. 2.

state,” as Terry Martin has done,<sup>18</sup> or study “cultural technologies of rule” such as “enumeration, mapping, and surveying,” as Hirsch did.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, it will also not concentrate on reconstructing the role of Central Asian Muslim intellectuals and political actors in the making of the Central Asian Soviet Republics, as scholars such as Khalid, Arne Haugen, Paul Bergne, and Adrienne Edgar have done.<sup>20</sup> This is a story about continuity, but more the continuity of the former imperial educated elite than the former colonials.

While other scholars, such as Litvinskii and Akramov and, more recently, Sergei Abashin and Alisher Ilkhamov, have studied Semenov’s role in writing Tajik and Uzbek national histories and forging official national identities during the 1940s and 1950s,<sup>21</sup> this article sheds light on the earlier and less explored period of Semenov’s life. Specifically, I am interested here in the history of transforming an Aryan myth of empire into a myth of Tajik national identity during the late imperial and early Soviet periods. While corroborating Laruelle’s argument about the origins of the Tajik Aryan myth in late nineteenth-century Russian orientalist scholarship, the present study also suggests that what ingrained this myth in Tajik nationalist discourse were the political arguments and rivalries among Central Asian and European advocates of Tajik and Uzbek statehood in the immediate aftermath of the establishment of Tajikistan during the so-called National Territorial Delimitation (NTD) of the 1920s. It was in this local Central Asian context of the NTD that the notion of the Tajiks’ Aryan descent was increasingly employed to demarcate and differentiate Tajik from Uzbek national identity.

Adeeb Khalid has stressed the importance of the local dynamics of the NTD, arguing that “Muslim intellectuals, not Soviet ethnographers or party

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<sup>18</sup> Terry Martin. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Ithaca, 2001. P. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Hirsch. *Empire of Nations*. P. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Adeeb Khalid. *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*; Idem. *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*. Ithaca, 2015; Paul Bergne. *The Birth of Tajikistan: National Identity and the Origins of the Republic*. London, 2007; Arne Haugen. *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*. Basingstoke, 2003; Adrienne Lynn Edgar. *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan*. Princeton, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Litvinskii and Akramov. Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Semenov; Sergei Abashin. *Ethnogenesis and Historiography: Historical Narratives for Central Asia in the 1940s and 1950s* // Roland Cvetkovski and Alexis Hofmeister (Eds.). *An Empire of Others: Creating Ethnographic Knowledge in Imperial Russia and the USSR*. Budapest, 2014. Pp. 145–171; Alisher Ilkhamov. Iakubovskii and Others: Canonizing Uzbek National History // Florian Mühlfried and Sergey Sokolovskiy (Eds.). *Exploring the Edge of Empire: Soviet Era Anthropology in the Caucasus and Central Asia*. Berlin, 2011. Pp. 237–259.

functionaries, were the true authors of Uzbekistan and the Uzbek nation.”<sup>22</sup> As my research shows, in practical terms, it is difficult to clearly differentiate between these groups of people. They collaborated and opposed each other simultaneously, in different sociopolitical contexts of what can be called the imperial situation.<sup>23</sup> The “making of Tajikistan” appears to have been a process in which both European experts, such as Semenov, and Central Asian intellectuals, such as Sadriddin Aini (1878–1954), participated. The scholarship and activism of Semenov and some of his colleagues influenced NTD’s delimitation of borders and identities, even though this process was highly contingent on local Central Asian conditions.<sup>24</sup> The notion of the Tajiks’ Aryan descent is not only an example of this influence but also a reminder of the fact that the idea of a Tajik nation – notwithstanding its nature as the by-product of an insurgent Uzbek nationalism<sup>25</sup> – was rooted in an earlier imperial situation, which had paved the way for its emergence. Reviewing *Making Uzbekistan*, Abashin has suggested looking for “an earlier genealogy” of the “idea of Tajikistan.”<sup>26</sup> My argument is that the concept of a distinct Tajik “ethnicity” or “nation” was a prerequisite for the establishment of a Tajik state, and that Russian orientalists who helped producing this concept were one part of this genealogy.

***The Aryans: from an Indo-European family of languages to a family of peoples***

The Aryans were an imagined entity primarily constructed on the basis of language. They were the creation of comparative philology, which had

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<sup>22</sup> Khalid. *Making Uzbekistan*. P. 15.

<sup>23</sup> The group of researchers associated with Ab Imperio has suggested avoiding “a universal theory or a generic definition of empire,” and working instead “with a model of the imperial situation defined by the tensions, incongruity, and incommensurability of the languages of self-description.” See Ilya Gerasimov, Jan Kusber and Alexander Semyonov (Eds.). *Empire Speaks Out: Languages of Rationalization and Self-Description in the Russian Empire*. Leiden, 2009. P. 23.

<sup>24</sup> It should not be read as part of what Sebastian Conrad has identified as “a metanarrative, ... [that] assumes a general process of modernization that originated in Europe and was then gradually disseminated around the globe.” See Sebastian Conrad. *What is Global History?* Princeton, 2016. P. 73.

<sup>25</sup> Khalid. *Making Uzbekistan*. P. 291.

<sup>26</sup> Sergei Abashin. Review: Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015). 415 pp., ill. Bibliography. Index. ISBN: 978-0-8014-5409-7 // Ab Imperio. 2016. Vol. 17. No. 4. Pp. 263–264.

become fashionable since the end of the eighteenth century, following William Jones's (1675–1749) discovery of close resemblances between European languages, on the one hand, and Sanskrit and Persian, on the other. On the basis of this discovery, the hypothesis of an Indo-European language family emerged. Deduced from this hypothesis was the concept of a primal population of Indo-European speakers, who were given a name taken from Sanskrit – Aryans.<sup>27</sup> However, this linguistic understanding of the Aryans did not remain unchallenged. According to Stefan Arvidsson, scholars have tended to define “‘the Indo-European branch of humanity’ ... either as the group of people who spoke some Indo-European language ... or as the group of Aryans, who were typically imagined as tall, blond, and blue-eyed specimens of *homo sapiens*.”<sup>28</sup> While the former culturalistic definition initially dominated the scholarship on the Indo-European subject, it was soon challenged by a more naturalistic approach, which was promoted by racial anthropologists eager to define the Aryans in physical terms.<sup>29</sup>

The Indo-European subject intrigued scholars and intellectuals throughout Europe, not least because it promised to shed light on the origins of their languages and peoples. Laruelle suggested that Russian intellectuals embraced the notion of their nation's Aryan descent because it provided Russia with its own link to a hypothetical Indo-Iranian or Aryan ancestry in the ancient Orient.<sup>30</sup> Marina Mogilner has found that Russian scholars embraced racial anthropology and the idea of an Aryan race and sometimes even claimed that the Russians were among the most homogeneous groups of Aryans.<sup>31</sup> According to Tolz, some Russian scholars, led by Vasilii Grigor'ev (1816–1881), “identified the Aryan historic homelands in Central Asia or in Siberia.”<sup>32</sup>

The notion of a Central Asian Aryan homeland frequently went hand in hand with the view that people of Aryan descent had survived in the isolation of the region's mountains. The Norwegian-German Indologist Christian Lassen (1800–1876) first portrayed “the Hindu Kush as a place where racially pure Aryans still live.”<sup>33</sup> Many scholars identified these

<sup>27</sup> Stefan Arvidsson. *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*. Chicago, 2006. P. 10; Thomas R. Trautmann. *Aryans and British India*. Berkeley, 1997. P. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. P. 313.

<sup>30</sup> Marlène Laruelle. *Mythe Aryen et Rêve Impérial Dans la Russie du XIXe Siècle*. Paris, 2005. P. 22, 47.

<sup>31</sup> Marina Mogilner. *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia*. Lincoln, 2013. Pp. 11, 178.

<sup>32</sup> Tolz. *Russia's Own Orient*. P. 60.

<sup>33</sup> Arvidsson. *Aryan Idols*. P. 20.



Aryans with the Tajiks and in particular with the so-called Mountain Tajiks or Galcha, as the Pamiri peoples were called by most scholars at the time.<sup>34</sup> The Austro-Hungarian ethnographer Charles de Ujfalvy (1842–1904), for example, regarded the Tajiks of northern Persia and Turkestan as well as the Galcha of the valleys neighboring the Pamirs, as the ancestors of Europe's own alleged Aryan forefathers.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, Franz von Schwarz (1847–1903), the German director of the Turkestan Meteorological Institute, published *Turkestan: The Cradle of the Indo-Germanic Peoples* in 1900, which argued that the Tajiks' "type [*Typus*, i.e., physiognomy] resembles the one of the unalloyed [*unvermischt*] descendants of the Indo-Germanic [i.e., Aryan] aborigines [of Turkestan], the Galcha."<sup>36</sup> Both authors' emphasis on physical appearance illustrates how much the theory of an Indo-European family of languages had evolved since its humanistic-philological beginnings. By 1900, the Aryans were no longer imagined merely as a family of speakers of an Aryan *Ursprache* but as a racial community.

### ***The Aryan myth of empire: Count Bobrinskii's Pamirs expedition of 1898***

The Aryan myth was not only a myth of national origins and identity but also a legitimizing narrative of Russia's imperial expansion into Central Asia, as Laruelle and, more recently, Alexander Morrison have pointed out.<sup>37</sup> It cast this expansion as an imperial reconquest of the alleged ancient Central Asian homeland of the Aryans by the "new Aryans" – the Russians.<sup>38</sup> As early as 1877 members of the imperial elite propagated the idea that it was Russia's historical destiny to liberate her Aryan brethren in Central Asia's mountainous

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<sup>34</sup> "Galcha" (or "Ghalcha") was exclusively a foreign appellation, which was used by the Persian speakers of the plains and by some speakers of Turkic to signify the Iranophone mountain dwellers of Eastern Bukhara (present-day Tajikistan). Lutz Rzehak. Vom Persischen zum Tadschikischen: Sprachliches Handeln und Sprachplanung in Transoxanien Zwischen Tradition, Moderne und Sowjetmacht (1900–1956). Wiesbaden, 2001. P. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Charles de Ujfalvy. Les Aryens au Nord et au Sud de L'Hindou-Kouch. Paris, 1896. P. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Franz von Schwarz. Turkestan, die Wiege der Indogermanischen Völker. Nach Fünfzehnjährigem Aufenthalt in Turkestan Dargestellt von Franz V. Schwarz. Freiburg im Breisgau, 1900. P. 8.

<sup>37</sup> Laruelle. Mythe Arien. Pp. 13, 138; Alexander Morrison. Scramble on the Roof of the World: The Russian Exploration and Annexation of the Pamirs, 1876–1905 // Alexander Morrison. The Russian Conquest of Central Asia 1814–1907: A Study in Imperial Expansion (forthcoming).

<sup>38</sup> Laruelle. Mythe Arien. P. 138.

regions from the Turkic yoke.<sup>39</sup> This narrative applied particularly strongly to the Pamirs and its vicinity, which retained a special place in the public and scholarly imagination as the likely Aryan *Urheimat*. Turkestan's governor-general Aleksandr Vrevskii (1834–1910) reproduced this narrative during the opening ceremony of the Turkestan Circle of Devotees of Archaeology in December 1895 (in the aftermath of the Russo-British border agreement in the Pamirs<sup>40</sup>): “Today fate has led us – Aryans, to the places whence once upon a time our ancestors have come ... [and] where once blossomed the Aryan culture that we are now asked to restore.”<sup>41</sup> These words and the context in which they were uttered hint at the synergy between imperial expansion and scholarly exploration that Semenov and some of his contemporaries benefited from.

One opportunity that arose from this synergy between empire and academia was the 1898 Pamirs expedition by the Russian nobleman and amateur ethnographer Aleksei Bobrinskii (1861–1938), which took place under the aegis of the Moscow University-based Society of Devotees of Natural Science, Anthropology, and Ethnography.<sup>42</sup> Semenov was in his mid-twenties and still a student when he joined Bobrinskii and the zoologist Nikolai Bogoiavlenskii (1887–1930) to visit Darvaz,<sup>43</sup> Qarategin,<sup>44</sup> and parts of the Bukharan plain bordering with Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup> This was when he first encountered the Iranophone inhabitants of that region whom he called Mountain Tajiks.<sup>46</sup> Daniel Beben has stressed that Bobrinskii's expedition produced some of the earliest studies on the Pamiri peoples and on the religious traditions of the adherents of the Ismaili branch of Shia Islam in the region.<sup>47</sup> The trip had a profound impact on Semenov's formation as a scholar. It marked

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<sup>39</sup> Morrison. *Scramble on the Roof*.

<sup>40</sup> Seymour Becker. *Russia's Protectorates in Central Asia: Bukhara and Khiva, 1865–1924*. Cambridge, MA, 1968. P. 122.

<sup>41</sup> Valerii Germanov. *Turkestanskii kruzhek liubitelei arkheologii: primat nauki ili geopolitiki?* // <http://mytashkent.uz/2010/02/25/turkestanskiy-kruzhek-lyubiteley-arheologii/>.

<sup>42</sup> V. P. Terekhov. *Iz istorii pamirovedeniia: tri ekspeditsii grafa A. A. Bobrinskogo* // *Etnograficheskoe Obozrenie*. 2011. No. 2. P. 33.

<sup>43</sup> Darvaz is divided today between Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province and the Badakhshan province of Afghanistan.

<sup>44</sup> Today's Rasht Valley in Tajikistan.

<sup>45</sup> Terekhov. *Iz istorii pamirovedeniia*. P. 33.

<sup>46</sup> von Schwarz. *Turkestan*. P. 8.

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Beben. *The Legendary Biographies of Nāṣir-i Khusraw: Memory and Textualization in Early Modern Persian Ismāʿīlism* / PhD dissertation; Indiana University, 2015. P. 29.

the beginning of his lifelong fascination with the history and literary heritage of what he regarded as Central Asia's Iranian or Persianate culture in general and with the teachings of Ismailism in particular. After his return to Moscow, Semenov wrote his dissertation at the Lazarev Institute about the dialects of the Mountain Tajiks.<sup>48</sup> A further result of his liaison with Bobrinskii was his first major scholarly publication *Ethnographic Outlines of the Zarafshan Mountains, Qarategin and Darvaz*, which was published in 1903.<sup>49</sup> These and subsequent publications cemented Semenov's reputation as a scholar.

Notwithstanding its academic significance, it is important to regard the expedition of 1898 in the context of empire.<sup>50</sup> First, the expedition enjoyed the imperial state's patronage. In 1896 Governor-General Vrevskii had reminded the vice-president of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society about the need to study the Pamirs and its vicinity.<sup>51</sup> In addition, on the eve of the expedition Russia's first professor of physical anthropology, Dmitrii Anuchin (1843–1923),<sup>52</sup> wrote a letter of support of Bobrinskii to the ministers of foreign affairs and war, Mikhail Murav'ev (1845–1900) and Aleksei Kuropatkin (1848–1925), respectively.<sup>53</sup> The latter responded by sending a similar note to the Bukharan Emir Abd al-Ahad Khan (1859–1911), who in his turn – in the words of Nikolai Bogoiavlenskii – “placed our expedition under his auspices, assigned one of his court officials to us and issued a firman declaring us his, the emir's, guests.”<sup>54</sup> Second, Bobrinskii was one of the most prominent voices calling for the extension of Russian patronage over the supposedly Aryan inhabitants of the empire's borderlands and for the official recognition of the Ismailis as an independent denomination. Publishing the results of his first Pamirs expedition in 1902, he suggested to “extend the hand of friendship to the sectarians ..., [and to] officially acknowledge their existence and, thereby, shield them from the yoke of the

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<sup>48</sup> Aleksandr Semenov. *Materialy dlia izucheniiia narechiiia gornyx tadjikov Tsentralnoi Azii*. Vol. 1: Grammaticheskii ocherk i pamiatniki narodnogo tvorchestva. Moscow, 1900; Vol. 2: Pamiatniki narodnogo tvorchestva i slovar'. Moscow. 1901.

<sup>49</sup> Aleksandr Semenov. *Etnograficheskie ocherki Zarafsanskich gor, Karategina i Darvaza*. Moscow, 1903.

<sup>50</sup> For a theoretical take on the concept of empire “as a context-setting category that frames the historical reconstruction of a historical context,” see Alexander Semyonov. *Empire as a Context Setting Category // Ab Imperio*. 2008. No. 1. P. 199.

<sup>51</sup> Davlat Khudonazarov. *Pamirskie ekspeditsii grafa A. A. Bobrinskogo 1895–1901 godov: Etnograficheskii albom*. Moscow, 2013. P. 55.

<sup>52</sup> Mogilner. *Homo Imperii*. P. 133.

<sup>53</sup> Khudonazarov. *Pamirskie ekspeditsii*. P. 55.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

official Sunnism of the Bukharans.”<sup>55</sup> He depicted the Ismailis as “a fertile ground for the instillment of Russian culture ...,” and argued that it would be “easy to turn them into devoted friends and, thereby, to create a loyal and trustworthy bulwark against the enemies of Russian rule in Asia at the distant frontier and at the crossroads of three states.”<sup>56</sup>

Bobrinskii’s advocacy of the official recognition of the Ismailis as an independent denomination legitimized imperial rule over them. But there was more to his words than just imperialist wishful thinking. Compared to the preceding more violent stages of the Russian conquest of Central Asia, resistance against the annexation of the Pamirs was weak.<sup>57</sup> This helps to explain why, according to Wolfgang Holzwarth, “Bobrinskii’s concept of trading loyalty to the state for the protection of minorities proved workable between 1905 and 1918.”<sup>58</sup> Much to Semenov’s advantage, it led to an opening up of Ismaili religious dogmas and philosophical convictions that hitherto had been shrouded in secrecy.<sup>59</sup>

Bobrinskii’s sympathetic and patronizing stance toward the Ismailis was fully in line with the common Orientalist cliché of the “noble savage.”<sup>60</sup> Reviewing one of Bobrinskii’s works on the subject, Semenov stressed that the author suspects “the traces of an ancient aristocratic race, the Aryan one, ... in these mountain dwellers.”<sup>61</sup> The review highlighted “the author’s affectionate attitude toward ... the Mountain Tajiks,” who had been “cast to these harsh lands of peaks enshrouded in clouds and the blinding glare of permanent snow and ice by the will of fate and various peripeteias of history.”<sup>62</sup> Needless to say, the notion of the downtrodden Mountain Tajiks, who had been “harassed, dispossessed in a struggle beyond their strength” and forced into the inaccessible mountains “by bad fate or by a ruthless des-

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<sup>55</sup> A. A. Bobrinskii. *Sekta Ismailia v russkikh i bukharskikh predelakh Srednei Azii* // *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*. 1902. No. 14. P. 18.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Morrison. *Scramble on the Roof*.

<sup>58</sup> Wolfgang Holzwarth. *Die Ismailiten in... Nordpakistan: zur Entwicklung einer religiösen Minderheit im Kontext neuer Aussenbeziehungen*. Berlin, 1994. P. 36.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> See, for instance, Dane Kennedy. *Guardians of Edenic Sanctuaries: Paharis, Lepchas, and Todas in the British Mind* // *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*. 1991. Vol. 14. No. 2. Pp. 57–77.

<sup>61</sup> Aleksandr Semenov. Bobrinskii, A. A. *Gortsy verkhov’ev Piandzha (Vakhantsy i Ishkashimtsy)*. *Ocherki byta po putevym zametkam*. (Review) // *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*. 1909. No. 1. P. 99.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

pot or victor” was part of a narrative legitimizing imperial rule.<sup>63</sup> However, more surprising is the fact that this narrative reemerged as part of the official rationale behind the establishment of a Tajik autonomy within Uzbekistan in 1924 because it allowed the portrayal of Tajik territorial political autonomy as an affirmative and compensatory measure to right past wrongs. Its logic is even more apparent in the wording of the initial proposal for the creation of a modest Tajik Autonomous Province from 1924:

The offer of autonomy to this province is especially significant, since no nation ... has been subjected to such a long and heavy oppression as has the mountain Tajik nation. Driven by the victorious Turks into the inaccessible mountainous ravines, they were forced to lead a half-starved existence.<sup>64</sup>

What Bobrinskii had promoted as imperial patronage, Semenov would help to refashion as Soviet affirmative action.<sup>65</sup> The well-tried notion of the downtrodden Mountain Tajiks dovetailed with the compensatory anticolonialism promoted by the Bolsheviks during the 1920s. Semenov was of course not the only expert popularizing this view. Bartol'd, whose opinion carried more weight than Semenov's, penned a report to the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet government in December 1929, in which he criticized the view that it was somehow a national trait of the Tajiks to live in the mountains. He argued that “the Turks had forced the ... ‘ancestors of the Tajiks’ ... ‘out of the plains and into the mountains.’”<sup>66</sup> Similarly, three years earlier the former colonial administrator, orientalist, and Semenov's colleague, Pavel Vvedenskii (1880–1938), who was a member of a Special Commission for Tajikistan Affairs (formed in 1926 under the auspices of the Central Asian Economic Bureau), described the Tajiks “as an ‘oppressed nation’ because, ... they had been expelled by tribal groups into the mountains.”<sup>67</sup>

Vvedenskii's terminology followed the logic of what Martin has defined as one of the premises of Soviet affirmative action, namely, the colonial premise and the greatest-danger principle, which – as Lenin wrote in 1914 – “distinguished between the nationalism of oppressor nations and

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Bergne. *Birth of Tajikistan*. P. 48. Unfortunately, the author of the proposal is unknown.

<sup>65</sup> For the concept of Bolshevik nationalities policy as a form of affirmative action, see Terry Martin. *The Affirmative Action*.

<sup>66</sup> Hirsch. *Empire of Nations*. P. 184.

<sup>67</sup> Botakoz Kassymbekova. *Humans as Territory: Forced Resettlement and the Making of Soviet Tajikistan, 1920–38* // *Central Asian Survey*. 2011. Vol. 30. No. 3–4. P. 355.

the nationalism of oppressed nations.”<sup>68</sup> At the same time, his words also echoed what Bobrinskii and Semenov had written about the Mountain Tajiks long before affirmative action was even thought of. In other words, although Semenov’s voice in this context was neither the loudest nor the one closest to the government’s ear during the 1920s, he was nonetheless one of the pioneers of the study of Ismailism and the Mountain Tajiks and a recognized authority in that field.<sup>69</sup> As such, he had an equally important influence on the emergence of what Paul Bergne has called “a Tajik persecution myth” – a myth that was of course closely related to that of the Tajiks’ Aryan descent.<sup>70</sup>

### *The Tajiks as Aryan brethren*

Semenov’s writing on the Tajiks was influenced by tropes that were characteristic of the wider scholarship on the Aryans (or Indo-Europeans) at the time, such as the notion of kinship between the Europeans and their supposed “Aryan brethren” in Asia. It seems instructive to compare his portrayal of the Mountain Tajiks in his texts resulting from the Bobrinskii expedition with the picture of a Tajik nation of Aryan descent that he drew in an unpublished work from the 1920s.

#### THE MOUNTAIN TAJIKS

“The first European scholars to investigate Badakhshān and its people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century considered the region to be the preserve of Aryan races undiluted by the mixtures of Turkic and Mongol blood found in the lowland regions of Central Asia.”<sup>71</sup> This conclusion also applies to Semenov and the work on the Mountain Tajiks that he published as a result of the Bobrinskii expedition. “About the Beliefs of the Mountain Tajiks,” for example, which was published in 1900, was concerned with “the mountain dweller’s ... old perennial beliefs and customs, which have almost

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<sup>68</sup> Martin. *The Affirmative Action*. P. 7.

<sup>69</sup> According to Beben, “the true beginnings of the study of the Central Asian *Ismā‘īlī* tradition rests entirely upon the shoulders of three Russian scholars: Ivan Zarubin, Wladimir Ivanow, and Aleksandr Semenov.” See Beben. *The Legendary Biographies*. P. 30. The renowned orientalist Ignatii Krachkovskii called Semenov “our prime authority in the field of the history of the Ismaili movement.” See Ignatii Krachkovskii. *Die russische Arabistik: Umriss ihrer Entwicklung*. Leipzig, 1957. P. 166.

<sup>70</sup> Bergne. *Birth of Tajikistan*. P. 128

<sup>71</sup> Beben. *The Legendary Biographies*. P. 5.

disappeared among his kinsman – the Valley Tajiks.”<sup>72</sup> In a similar vein, Semenov’s *Ethnographic Outlines of the Zarafshan Mountains, Qarategin and Darvaz* introduced the geographical setting of the study as a region that is “highly revered in the legends of the primeval [*pervobytnye*] Indo-Iranians.”<sup>73</sup> Hinting at traces of an ancient pre-Islamic Iranian civilization, he wrote that the Mountain Tajiks “call their ancestors by the generic name ‘otash-parast,’ that is, fire worshippers,” and that they mention “the ancient prophet Zoroaster” when speaking about their past.<sup>74</sup>

The work also contains a rare example of Semenov explicitly venturing into the realms of racial anthropology. Some Mountain Tajiks, he wrote, “resemble in their typical facial features the population of our Great Russian provinces and the German plains.”<sup>75</sup> All these quotes are in line with what was characteristic for the scholarship on the Aryan subject at the time. That said, it is worth pointing out that Semenov did not use the term “Aryan” explicitly. Where he did use that term, for instance, in his reviews of Bobrinskii’s *The Mountaineers of the Upper Reaches of the River Panj*, he did so carefully. Reviewing the book favorably, he wrote that the author’s research on the culture of certain Pamiri peoples provided “a thoughtful historian-orientalist [*istorik-orientalist*] and philologist-Iranologist ... with much material ... for thought about the ancient aspects of the way of life of the Aryan tribes.”<sup>76</sup> The reason Semenov did use the word “Aryan” in this context is that he was referring to the hypothetical ancient Aryans, traces of whose culture he believed to be reflected in the contemporary customs and beliefs of the Pamiri peoples.

Race was certainly an underlying, unquestioned and occasionally surfacing assumption in Semenov’s above-mentioned works. His research, especially that on the Mountain Tajiks, was part of and influenced by what Mogilner has called the “universal discourse” of race, which during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was “a dominant epistemology, an instrument that unlocked nearly all social, cultural, and political phenomena in the world.”<sup>77</sup> Semenov did not have to be a craniologist in order to nonetheless assume that race existed and was a historical category with explana-

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<sup>72</sup> Aleksandr Semenov. Iz oblasti religioznykh verovanii gornykh tadjikov // *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*. 1900. No. 4. P. 81.

<sup>73</sup> Semenov. *Etnograficheskie ocherki*. P. 1.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* P. 19.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* P. 26.

<sup>76</sup> Semenov. Bobrinskii, A. A. Gortsy verkhov’ev Piandzha. P. 99.

<sup>77</sup> Mogilner. *Homo Imperii*. P. 2.

tory power. Still, it is hard to overlook that he was much more interested in the culture of the Mountain Tajiks than in their looks, and that his research concerned not race but language and especially the “old perennial beliefs and customs” of an elusive bygone ancient pre-Islamic Iranian civilization, which was of course a hobbyhorse of Aryan studies.<sup>78</sup>

#### ARYAN BRETHREN

Semenov’s vision of the Tajiks hallmarks another prominent theme of the research on the Aryan subject, namely, that of a brotherhood of Aryan peoples, which was a founding paradigm of research on the subject.<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, this is particularly apparent in Semenov’s texts from the early Soviet period. In these, he married the older Aryan rhetoric with the concept – at the time topical – of national self-determination. A good example is the unpublished article “A Short Outline of the Historical Fortunes of the Tajik People,” which appears to have been written around 1924, and which introduced the Tajiks as “the most ancient inhabitants of Central Asia ... who belong to the Asian representatives of the great Indo-European family of peoples [*narodov*].”<sup>80</sup> The last sentence of the article even described “the talented Tajik people [*narod*]” as the “eastern brother of the European nations [*natsii*].”<sup>81</sup>

The inversion of the inclusive portrayal of the Tajiks as the Europeans’ Indo-European brethren is the exclusion of the Turkic, Mongol (and Arabic) “invaders.” Anticipating contemporary Tajik nationalist discourse, Semenov proclaimed that whereas the rule of “the local Iranian national dynasty of the enlightened Samanids” led to “a ‘golden age’ of ... Persian literature,” the subsequent “hegemony of the Turks ... was a gloomy period in the history of the Tajiks.”<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, this vision of Central Asian history equated “high culture” with Tajik culture: “The Tajik people, even after having lost its political dominance, preserved the light of high cultural achievements in this country.” Semenov added that their “Aryan genius [*ariiskii geni*]” manifested itself “in local architecture, fretwork and ironwork, in magnificent ceramics, ... in exquisite miniatures, and ... literature.”<sup>83</sup> In the same vein, the article painted a picture of “the Tajik people” as the bearer of “the inextinguishable light of pan-human [*obshchechelovecheskii*] culture.” They,

<sup>78</sup> Semenov. *Iz oblasti religioznykh*. P. 81.

<sup>79</sup> Trautmann. *Aryans and British*. P. 172.

<sup>80</sup> A.A.S. B12. F4. Pp. 1-9: “Kratkii ocherk istoricheskikh sudeb tadjhikskogo naroda.”

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*



“like all Persians,” withstood oppression, preserved “their national essence [*natsional’naia sushchnost’*]” and even instilled “part of their own spirit [*dukh*] onto their conquerors, the Arabs, Turks and Mongols.”<sup>84</sup> Semenov went on to prophesy a bright future for the liberated and self-determining Tajik nation (*natsiia*):

Now that it has been led onto the broad path of autonomous activity [*samodeiatel’nost’*], the Tajiks will undoubtedly succeed in liberating their primordial essence from the admixtures/impurity [*primes’*] overshadowing it.<sup>85</sup>

In other words, Tajik national self-determination would allow the original Aryan genius to blossom unfettered by alien impurities. Here we are not too far from the notion of racial hygiene.

When compared to Semenov’s writings about the Mountain Tajiks at the turn of the century, the text above demonstrates a more racialized approach resonating with the dominant language and tropes of the “Aryan studies” of the time. One such trope was, according to Arvidsson, “the opposition between the Iranians or Aryans, ‘people of the plow’ . . . , and the Turanians, the warlike and barbaric nomads.”<sup>86</sup> Semenov’s juxtaposition of the Tajiks’ “light of high cultural achievements” with the alleged cultural decline under the “hegemony of the Turks,” but also the metaphor of light and the expression “Aryan genius” contrasted supposedly ingenious Aryans to unimaginative Semites.<sup>87</sup> This binary model had been popularized by influential French authors such as Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (1816–1882) and Ernest Renan (1823–1892), who conceptualized the history of the Muslim world as a struggle between a *génie sémitique* and a *génie aryén*, depicting the former in a negative light and conferring to the latter the virtues of creativity, reason, and culture.<sup>88</sup> Semenov and some Russian authors opposed the Aryans not to Semites but to Turks, thereby avoiding anti-Semitic overtones only to replace them with anti-Turkic ones.

In this respect, he seems to have been influenced by Agafangel Efimovich Krymskii (1871–1942), an orientalist, poet, and famous Ukrainian nationalist, who was also one of his favorite teachers at the Lazarev Insti-

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Arvidsson. Aryan Idols. P. 58.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. P. 318.

<sup>88</sup> Laruelle. Mythe Aryen. P. 173; Mark Batunsky. Racism in Russian Islamology: Agafangel Krinsky // Central Asian Survey. 1992. Vol. 11. No. 4. P. 79.

tute.<sup>89</sup> Krymskii viewed Islamic societies through a racist and dichotomous prism, which opposed allegedly creative and rational Aryans (and Semites) to supposedly dull and fanatic Turks (and Mongols).<sup>90</sup> This Persophile and Turkophobe vision of Central Asian history informed the Tajik nationalist narrative of history that Semenov helped to devise during the 1920s, and which until today defines Tajik (Iranian/Aryan) national identity against an Uzbek (Turkic) “other.” It sat easily with an Aryan myth of empire that cast the Russian annexation of the Pamirs as the revival of beneficial and civilizing Aryan rule. It underlays both Bobrinskii’s promotion of imperial patronage over the Mountain Tajiks and Semenov’s advocacy of national self-determination for the Tajik “eastern brother of the European nations.”

### *Sharpening the contours of Tajik national identity*

The concept of Tajik history that Semenov promoted during the 1920s was a far cry from the view of his teacher Bartol’d, who stressed that “the history of the cultured regions of Central Asia and the history of such nomadic empires [as the Mongol empire] constitutes one almost inseparable whole.”<sup>91</sup> In one of his articles from 1914 he condemned “prejudiced assertions about races ... [and] the exaggerated notion of the cultural achievements of the Aryans and the barbarity of the Turks.”<sup>92</sup> Semenov was familiar with his teacher’s views and the above-mentioned text, which “[he] read ... with the greatest interest,” as he told Bartol’d in a letter.<sup>93</sup> Why then did he not manage to avoid the pitfalls of the Aryan discourse? The answer to that question lies in the political context of the NTD, which turned the Aryan myth into a myth of Tajik national identity. Semenov’s writings from the time not only bear the marks of this development, they helped to bring it about. By juxtaposing the Tajiks as racially Aryan and Iranophone aborigines to invading Turks, they facilitated the conceptualization of the Tajiks as a distinct and autochthonous nation within the entangled sociocultural milieu of the Central Asian sedentary population.

<sup>89</sup> Nina A. Kuznetsova. *Obzor arkhiva akademika Tadzhijskoi SSR A. A. Semanova* // Nina Kuznetsova (Ed.). *Iran: Sbornik Statei*. Moscow, 1971. P. 29. I am grateful to Paolo Sartori for bringing Kuznetsova’s survey to my attention.

<sup>90</sup> Batunsky. *Racism in Russian*. Pp. 75–84.

<sup>91</sup> Vasilii Bartol’d. *Sostoianie i zadachi izuchenii istorii Turkestana* // V. V. Bartol’d. *Sochineniia*. Vol. 9. P. 512.

<sup>92</sup> Vasilii Bartol’d. *Zadachi russkogo vostokovedeniia v Turkestane* // V. V. Bartol’d. *Sochineniia*. Vol. 9. P. 529.

<sup>93</sup> A.A.S. B13. F6. P. 46: Letter from A.A.S. to V. V. Bartol’d, 8.1.1915.

The NTD delimited national territories and identities. Demarcating Uzbeks from Tajiks proved particularly cumbersome. As Khalid put it, “separating ‘Uzbek’ or ‘Turk’ from ‘Tajik’ or ‘Iranian’ was not simply a matter of separating different colored marbles from a jar.”<sup>94</sup> The meaning of these designations was contextual and varied over time and place. Scholars, such as Bert Fragner, Eva Maria Subtelny and John Samuel Schoeberlein-Engel, have emphasized the interdependency, symbiosis, and fluidity of Tajik and Uzbek identity in late imperial and early Soviet Central Asia.<sup>95</sup> In the same vein, Khalid has stressed that “Persian and Turkic speakers lived deeply interconnected lives, in which customs and practices were identical, bilingualism common, and *language never a node of identity*.”<sup>96</sup>

Semenov was well aware of this “symbiosis of Turk and Tajik,” to use Eva Maria Subtelny’s expression. He knew that heterogeneity was the rule rather than the exception in Central Asia. In 1911, for instance, he wrote a review of the book *Tapisseries de l’Asie Central*, criticizing its too schematic portrayal of the ethnic groups of the Bukharan Khanate.<sup>97</sup> He stressed that “Uzbeks ..., Tajiks ..., Persians ..., Kirgiz ..., Turkmen ..., Arabs ..., Jews as well as Lyuli,<sup>98</sup> and Aralash [from the Turkic verb *aralashmaq* for ‘to mix’]” lived much more intermingled than the book suggested.<sup>99</sup> The NTD left little room for such ambiguity and sought to divide Central Asia and its population into clear-cut national categories and republics. The schematic view of the Tajiks as the Iranophone descendants of Central Asia’s Aryan aborigines provided such clarity. It buttressed Tajik claims to autochthony

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<sup>94</sup> Khalid. *Making Uzbekistan*. P. 292.

<sup>95</sup> Bert Fragner. *The Nationalization of the Uzbeks and Tajiks* // Edward Allworth (Ed.). *Muslim Communities Reemerge: Historical Perspectives on Nationality, Politics and Opposition in the Former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia*. Durham, 1994. Pp. 13–33; Eva Maria Subtelny. *The Symbiosis of Turk and Tajik* // Beatrice Manz (Ed.). *Central Asia in Historical Perspective*. Boulder, 1998. Pp. 45–61; John Samuel Schoeberlein-Engel. *Identity in Central Asia: Construction and Contention in the Conceptions of “Özbek,” “Tâjik,” “Muslim,” “Samarqandi” and Other Groups* / PhD dissertation; Harvard University, 1994.

<sup>96</sup> Khalid. *Making Uzbekistan*. P. 292.

<sup>97</sup> A. A. Semenov. *Kovry russkogo Turkestana* // *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*. 2011. No. 1. P. 138.

<sup>98</sup> The Lyuli are a subgroup of the Dom People, a branch of the Central Asian Roma. For more information, see Shirin Akiner. *Enduring Stranger: Mughat, Lyuli, and Other Peripatetics in the Social Fabric of Central Asia* // Joseph C. Berland and Aparna Rao (Eds.). *Customary Strangers: New Perspectives on Peripatetic Peoples in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia*. Westport, CT, 2004. Pp. 299–307.

<sup>99</sup> A. A. Semenov. *Kovry russkogo Turkestana*. P. 148.

and sharpened the contours of Tajik national identity by clearly distinguishing it from the Uzbeks, who were categorized as of Turkic origin. This lack of ambiguity is even more striking if one bears in mind that there had been a strong late imperial academic tradition in which “hybridity was perceived as a foundation of the norm” and “mixed racial type” had been a key concept.<sup>100</sup> Incidentally, Semenov’s above-mentioned text, too, categorized people as being of Turkish, Iranian, or mixed Turko-Iranian origin.<sup>101</sup> The paradox of the NTD was that its promotion of national republics and autonomies attempted to encourage diversity by eliminating ambiguity.

Thus, in order to facilitate singling out a distinctive ethnic group, Russian scholars identified the unambiguous *Idealtyp* of an Aryan or Iranian Tajik population only with the Mountain Tajiks. Stressing the role of Russian orientalists in promoting Tajik nationhood in 1924, Paul Bergne noted that it was the Mountain Tajiks, “who struck ... them as different in manners, culture and appearance” from the urban dwellers of the plains.<sup>102</sup> Semenov was among these orientalists. He was one of the most prominent scholars who had written on the subject of the Mountain Tajiks and Ismailis in the decades before the NTD. Moreover, he acted as a consultant to those carrying out and preparing the NTD. In 1924 the authorities of the Turkestan Soviet Socialist Republic commissioned him to produce what he described to Bartol’d as “a historical-ethnographical outline of Turkestan, written on the orders (to put it mildly) of the journal *The National Economy of Central Asia*.”<sup>103</sup>

As one can judge from this testimony, Semenov had little choice but to partake in the NTD, which he regarded primarily as a nuisance and unnecessary administrative shakeup.<sup>104</sup> He delivered the study “On the Problem of the National Delimitation of Central Asia (A Historical-Ethnographic Outline),” which opened with a reminder of the region’s ethnic heterogeneity and interconnectedness and of the fact that a “repartition [*pereraspredelenie*] of Turkestan in accordance with the ethnography and way of life of the population” had already been attempted and abandoned during the

<sup>100</sup> Ilya Gerasimov, Sergey Glebov and Marina Mogilner. Hybridity: Marrism and the Problems of Language of the Imperial Situation // *Ab Imperio*. 2016. Vol. 17. No. 1. Pp. 42, 57.

<sup>101</sup> A. A. Semenov. *Kovry russkogo Turkestana*. P. 138.

<sup>102</sup> Bergne. *Birth of Tajikistan*. P. 127.

<sup>103</sup> A.A.S. B13. F6. P. 132: Letter from A.A.S. to V. V. Bartol’d on 27.01.1925.

<sup>104</sup> In another letter to Bartol’d (from November 1924), Semenov wrote: “Here there is total perturbation in all institutions because of the delimitation. Who will be sent to other cities? Who will be closed down? The inventory and funds are being divided.” A.A.S. B13. F6. P. 188: Letter from A.A.S. to V. V. Bartol’d from November 1924.

1880s.<sup>105</sup> Describing the Tajiks as one of the “Iranian” and “indigenous” peoples of Central Asia, the paper reiterated the notion of the Mountain Tajiks as the quintessential Tajiks:

The mixing of the Tajiks of the plain with other peoples affected their type [*tip*] and the purity of their Persian language .... The Mountain Tajiks, on the other hand, isolated by the mountains from the numerous vicissitudes of this country’s history, have preserved their Aryan type and language in great purity.<sup>106</sup>

Subsuming both the “Tajiks of the plains and the Mountain Tajiks” under the category of one Iranophone people on the basis of their alleged Aryan descent, these lines propagated among intellectuals and political actors in Soviet Central Asia the view of the region’s entire Iranophone population as a people distinct from the remaining Turkic population.

It is important not to overstate the political influence of scholars such as Semenov. Adeeb Khalid even went as far as to dismiss this role altogether, arguing that the “opinions of experts played almost no role in the deliberations over the drawing of new boundaries in 1924.”<sup>107</sup> The problem is that there was also no support for a Tajik state among Central Asian urban elites, which Khalid himself duly notices: “Persian-speaking intellectuals and political actors did not identify themselves as Tajiks and did not therefore seek rights for a Tajik nation.”<sup>108</sup> Likewise, Haugen has stressed that it was “virtually impossible to identify a Tajik voice in the deliberations” concerning the NTD.<sup>109</sup> If so, it remains unclear who the primary locomotive of promoting a Tajik national compound was.

I would suggest that the relative significance of voices such as Semenov’s was a function of this lack of support for the project of a Tajik nation among the local educated elite. Gero Fedtke, Sergei Abashin, and, most explicitly, Adeeb Khalid have argued that Tajikistan was in effect a place of exile for those who had lost political battles in Uzbekistan.<sup>110</sup> This hypothesis looks

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<sup>105</sup> A.A.S. B10. F2. P. 1; Aleksandr Semenov. K probleme natsional’nogo razmezhevaniiia Srednei Azii (istoriko-etnograficheskii ocherk) // Narodnoe khoziaistvo Srednei Azii. 1924. No. 2-3. Pp. 26–40.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Khalid. Making Uzbekistan. P. 270.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. P. 291.

<sup>109</sup> Haugen. The Establishment. P. 150.

<sup>110</sup> Gero Fedtke. How Bukharans Turned into Uzbeks and Tajiks: Soviet Nationalities Policy in the Light of a Personal Rivalry // Paolo Sartori, Tommaso Trevisani (Eds.). Patterns of Transformation in and around Uzbekistan. Reggio Emilia, 2007. Pp. 19–50; S. N. Abashin. Natsionalizmy. P. 190; Khalid. Making Uzbekistan. Pp. 291–315.

plausible, but it does not explain the establishment of Tajikistan in the first place. “Tajik” might have been a residual category, but why did it acquire the status of a distinct nationality and find acceptance as such at all? I am suggesting that the prominent place the Mountain Tajiks enjoyed in the Russian (and wider European) scholarship and imagination as Aryans – kindred “noble savages” and oppressed aborigines of Central Asia – raised their profile and facilitated their classification as a separate nationality entitled to Soviet affirmative action in the form of political autonomy. Semenov aided the transformation of the category “Tajik” from what it had been for centuries prior to the Russian conquest (a sociocultural category rather than an ethnicity) into an ethnolinguistic notion, which was the nucleus of the idea of a Tajik nation and state.<sup>111</sup> Bartol’d captured the essence of this transformation in his entry “The Tajiks” in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Published in 1925, it highlighted both the modernity of the term “Tajik” as an ethnolinguistic classification and its political importance as a prerequisite for the establishment of a Tajik nation-state:

Nowadays ... the Russians subsume under the name “Tajik” all Iranian peoples of Turkestan – both the Tajiks as such, that is, the population that speaks Tojiki ..., and the mountain peoples ... who have a special status in terms of language. In keeping this usage of the term, the autonomous republic of Tajikistan was created in 1924.<sup>112</sup>

***Semenov’s rationale for promoting the idea of a Tajik nation of Aryan descent***

Ascribing Aryan ancestry to the Tajiks allowed Semenov to portray and study Tajik history in connection with Iranian history and in a wider regional context. The Aryan theme helped him to represent Tajik and Central Asian history for what he believed it to be: not peripheral, provincial, and homogeneous, but significant, cosmopolitan, and best understood in a wider regional context. This is why one of his texts criticized Edward Browne’s (1862–1926) *A Literary History of Persia* for paying too little attention to Central Asian poets, thereby tearing “an entire page of great importance ...

<sup>111</sup> Bert Fragner has argued that speaking an Iranian language was not the decisive criterion of falling under the sociocultural category “Tajik” as the “nominal precursors” of the modern Tajiks. Persian-speaking nomads, for instance, would not have been included in it, but the “settled, nontribal or detribalized groups of the population that were influenced by Iranian culture.” See Fragner. *The Nationalization*. P. 15.

<sup>112</sup> Vasilii Bartol’d. *Tadzhiki (iz Entsiklopediiislama)* // V. V. Bartol’d. *Sochineniia*. Vol. 2. Part I. Moscow, 1964. P. 470.

out of the common literary history of the Iranians.”<sup>113</sup> Alfrid Bustanov has stressed that although the NTD was inimical to the writing of regional history, Semenov and some of his colleagues from the Bartol’d school did not give up their regional perspective.<sup>114</sup>

Part of that perspective was also identification of certain population groups in the transnational category of Aryans, as Semenov’s article “Material Monuments of Aryan Culture” attests. Published in 1925, it described the “the current Tajik republic” as “merely an insignificant part of the rich archaeological inventory of the Aryans of Central Asia,” and as “one of many details in the overall picture of the country’s history ... [which] cannot be seen in separation from the remaining parts of the picture.”<sup>115</sup> Advocates of a “Greater Tajikistan” would later refer to this text to buttress their territorial claims.<sup>116</sup> But Semenov’s intent had not been to spur Tajik irredentism, but merely to write about Central Asia’s past from a regional perspective.

Apart from promoting regionalism, writing Tajik history as “Aryan” had another advantage. In the context of the political struggles accompanying the NTD, it was important not only to differentiate Tajiks from Uzbeks (by stressing the “Iranianness” of the former) but also to dissociate Tajik identity from Iran as a foreign country and from the Persian court culture of the Emirate of Bukhara as a major immediate predecessor of Soviet Turkestan. Bolsheviks and most of their Central Asian allies were busy discrediting the political legacy of Bukhara as the bulwark of Islamic bigotry.<sup>117</sup> The association of Tajiks with Aryans allowed the framing of their national project in categories unconditioned by any contemporary political or cultural realities and factors. Even in the historical perspective it rooted the Tajiks in Central Asia’s own, presumably Aryan, past rather than in ancient Persia as such, thereby bolstering a myth of Tajik autochthony.

The status of autochthons was important not only because it improved the chances of being acknowledged as one of the Soviet Union’s so-called

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<sup>113</sup> A.A.S. B12. F4. Pp. 1–9: *Kratkii ocherk*.

<sup>114</sup> Alfrid K. Bustanov. *Soviet Orientalism and the Creation of Central Asian Nations*. London, 2014. P. xx.

<sup>115</sup> A. A. Semenov. *Material’nye pamiatniki ariiskoi kul’tury* // N. L. Korzhenevskii (Ed.). *Tadzhikistan: sbornik statei*. Tashkent, 1925. P. 113.

<sup>116</sup> Abashin. *Natsionalizmy*. P. 190.

<sup>117</sup> Bert Fragner. *Sowjetmacht und Islam: Die Revolution von Buchara* // Hans Robert Roemer, Ulrich Haarmann and Peter Bachmann (Eds.). *Die islamische Welt zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit: Festschrift für Hans Robert Roemer zum 65. Geburtstag*. Wiesbaden, 1979. P. 153.

titular nations. In the Tajik case, it also helped to uphold the very idea of a distinct Tajik nation against a Turkist vision of Central Asia that left little space for Persianate culture. According to Khalid, the Turkist point of view was that “Central Asians who spoke Persian did so under the influence of morally corrupt royal courts.”<sup>118</sup>

One of the earliest and most influential written manifestations of Tajik nationalism, an anthology of Tajik-Persian poetry titled *Specimen of Tajik Literature*, meant to counter this Turkist perspective on Tajik identity.<sup>119</sup> Its author was Sadriddin Aini, a poet from the vicinity of Bukhara, who emerged as a leading Tajik intellectual in the 1920s. Aini explicitly mentioned the role of the book as an argument on the conflict with Turkist claims for hegemony in an autobiographical statement dating from 1949. Resorting to the ideological trope of the struggle of progressive Bolsheviks versus reactionary Pan-Turkists (optionally also Pan-Islamists or Pan-Iranists), Aini wrote that his book used “precise historical facts” to silence Pan-Turkists who claimed that “there is no such people as the Tajiks in Central Asia ... [and that] the Tajiks are simply Uzbeks who have lost their native Uzbek language under the influence of the Iranians and the madrasa.”<sup>120</sup>

One such historical fact was the Tajiks’ alleged Aryan descent. This thesis allowed the Tajiks to be connected not so much to the Persians as to their supposed mutual Aryan ancestors. Moreover, if recognized as the most authentic Aryans, the Tajiks turned out to be not of Persian origin but the ancestors of Persians themselves. “In Turkestan one can discern in the Tajiks a more archaic proto-Persian,” Semenov wrote in an unpublished paper.<sup>121</sup> Arguing in the same vein that Tajik literature “reflects the entire versatility of the Aryan genius,” he located the source of creative endeavor in Persian not in a foreign country (Iran) but in the “genius” of the Tajiks’ own Aryan ancestors.<sup>122</sup> Aini echoed this notion in his *Specimen of Tajik Literature*, in which he attributed “the flourishing of the Tajik language and literature” in Central Asia not to “the rule of the Samanids or ... the immigration of Iranians ...,” but to “the existence in these lands of a great people by the name of ‘Tajik,’ which belongs to the Aryan race [*ki mansub ba irqi Orist*].”<sup>123</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Khalid. *Making Uzbekistan*. P. 258.

<sup>119</sup> The book was commissioned by the Tajik authorities in the spring of 1925 and published the next year only to be banned in 1930.

<sup>120</sup> Sadriddin Aini. *Sobranie sochinenii*. Vol. 1. Moscow, 1971. P. 118.

<sup>121</sup> A.A.S. B12. F14. Pp. 1–4: “Stat’ia o Turkestane.”

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Sadriddin Aini. *Namunai Adabiëti Tojik*. Dushanbe, 2010. P. 4.



The question thus arises as to why Semenov and some of his colleagues decided to promote the thesis of the Tajiks' Aryan descent around the time Tajikistan was established. First of all, it is important to point out that they acted in accord with the fledgling Tajik government. A case in point is Semenov's "Material Monuments of Aryan Culture," which opened with the claim that "the Tajiks ... are, as is well known, the descendants of the ancient aborigines of the country, the Aryans of Asia."<sup>124</sup> The ink had barely dried on the decision to establish the Tajik Republic when this text by Semenov was published in 1925, in *Tajikistan: A Volume of Articles*. The collection also contained a chapter by Bartol'd, in which he complained that the constitution of the Turkestan Soviet Socialist Republic (1918–1924) had failed to acknowledge the indigenous status of "the country's most ancient inhabitants, the Tajiks."<sup>125</sup> Bartol'd concluded with what was essentially policy advice: "The future will tell to what extent the historical delimitation in 1924 will further the national rebirth of the Tajik nationality."<sup>126</sup>

His words show that the volume was not just prepared during the NTD but addressed it directly. It had been commissioned and financed by the provisional government of the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic – the Revolutionary Committee (Revkom).<sup>127</sup> It was published by the Society for the Study of Tajikistan and the Iranian Peoples beyond Its Borders, which had been founded in Tashkent in January 1925 on the initiative of the Tajik Revkom (and listed Semenov among its founding members).<sup>128</sup> Its foreword acknowledged the support of Abduqodir Muhiddinov (1892–1934), who led the Tajik government between 1926 and 1928, Nusratulla Makhsum (1881–1938), the head of the Tajik Revkom and the honorary chairman of the Society for the Study of Tajikistan, and Andrei Znamenskii (1887–1943), who was "the actual Chairman" of the Society for the Study of Tajikistan.<sup>129</sup> The latter was also the plenipotentiary of the USSR's People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs in Central Asia, without whose support the volume would probably not have been published.

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<sup>124</sup> A. A. Semenov. *Material'nye pamiatniki*. P. 113.

<sup>125</sup> V. V. Bartol'd. *Tadzhiki – Istoricheskii ocherk* // V. V. Bartol'd. *Sochineniia*. Vol. 2. Part I. P. 468.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Rzehak. *Vom Persischen*. P. 160.

<sup>128</sup> Efim Solomonovich Shagalov. *Pervoe Nauchnoe Obshchestvo Tadzhikistana*. Dushanbe, 1966. P. 7; D. S. Saidmuradov, I. S. Mal'tsev. *Iz istorii vostokovedeniia v Tadzhikistane, 1917–1958* gg. Dushanbe, 1990. Pp. 19–26.

<sup>129</sup> N. L. Korzhenevskii. Foreword // N. L. Korzhenevskii (Ed.). *Tadzhikistan*.

According to Bergne, Znamenskii had become concerned with the rise of Turkism in the Bukharan People's Soviet Republic (1920–1925) and “called on other academics to defend the rights of the Tajiks.”<sup>130</sup> Evidently, Semenov's and his colleagues' advocacy of Tajik national self-determination was sanctioned by the Soviet authorities. In this sense, Khalid is right to have pointed out that “the political process [of the NTD] reshaped ethnographic knowledge to a certain extent,” rather than the other way around.<sup>131</sup> Still, in the Tajik case the protest by leading experts on Central Asia such as Bartol'd and Semenov against the state's failure to take notice of “the country's most ancient inhabitants” (in the words of Bartol'd), appears to have been effective in putting Tajikistan on the map, both literally and metaphorically.

In addition to the political imperatives of the NTD and competing local national projects, Semenov and other Soviet specialists in Iranian studies were driven by their own personal interests in what I call the indigenization (*korenizatsiia*) of Persianate culture in Soviet Central Asia. Indigenizing Persianate culture, that is, conceptualizing it as the national culture of an indigenous Tajik nation (rather than as an Iranian or Persian import), greatly enhanced its political status and cultural significance in the USSR. Representing Persianate culture as an inherent and indispensable part of Central Asian heritage meant that it was becoming a legitimate object of study eligible for Union-wide promotion and subsidizing. Orientalists were among the beneficiaries of this official recognition, even though cultural indigenization with its essentialized perception of Tajiks contradicted Semenov's own regionalist understanding of Central Asian history.

The personal methodological compromise enabled him, Aini, and others to salvage Central Asia's rich Persian literary heritage for the Soviet future in the guise of Tajik national culture. Under the constraints of the early Soviet Cultural Revolution, it was safer to cast the Persianate culture as the manifestation of the people's “Aryan genius” rather than as the legacy of a corrupt and foreign court culture. Here, the Aryan theme was a means to this end, not the end itself. The indigenization of Persianate culture was thus inextricably linked to the NTD. It was a reaction to the threat of its being marginalized as a foreign (Iranian) import and relic of a “feudal” past. According to Khalid, “the explosion of Turkism in 1917 ... meant a disavowal of Persian and the heritage it represented.”<sup>132</sup> In January 1925, a Tashkent newspaper called on Tajiks to “immediately begin [using] the Uzbek language,” describing

<sup>130</sup> Bergne. *Birth of Tajikistan*. P. 150.

<sup>131</sup> Khalid. *Making Uzbekistan*. P. 270.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* P. 293.

Persian as a “useless and superfluous language,” whose fate had been sealed by “the path of socialist progress.”<sup>133</sup> If Persian was to shed its negative image as elitist and a remnant of a discredited ancien régime, it needed to be anchored in Central Asia’s supposed perennial and truly popular Aryan past.

The indigenization of Persianate culture was part of a wider regional process that predated Soviet power. The Persian language had already come under pressure in the decades preceding the NTD. According to Lutz Rzehak, its demise in Central Asia must be seen within the context of a wider intraregional process that led to “the end of the dominance of the Persian language in large swathes in Western, Central, and South Asia and neighboring regions.”<sup>134</sup> Bert Fragner has conceptualized this dominance of Persian as the *Persophonie*, that is, the spatiotemporal area in which Persian was the universal language of literature and often also the vernacular.<sup>135</sup> The rise of colonialism and nationalism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries led to the dissolution of this *Persophonie*. The English (and the Urdu) replaced Persian in India; Iranian and Afghan intellectuals reframed the Persian language and culture in national Iranian and Afghan terms, respectively; and in Central Asia, Persian demised with the rise of Turkism and the ascent of Russian.<sup>136</sup>

The indigenization of Persianate culture that followed the establishment of Tajikistan in 1924 should be seen against this background of Persian ceasing to serve as the lingua franca. While the NTD gave a boost to the Persian in Soviet Central Asia as it acquired the status of Tajikistan’s national language, the language itself underwent a radical transformation. *Forsi*, that is, the language of prestige that had dominated the spheres of religion, literature, science, administration, and trade for almost a millennium in Transoxiana, was replaced by *Tojiki*, “a language whose function was largely reduced to that of the primary language of a community of speakers defined by national criteria.”<sup>137</sup> This transformation from *Forsi* to *Tojiki* was concomitant with the imagining of Central Asia’s Iranophone population as “the Tajiks.” It relied on the conflation of race and language, more precisely, on the conflated notion that Persian was part of the Aryan family of languages and the Tajiks members of the Aryan family of peoples.

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<sup>133</sup> Rahim Masovich Masov. *Tadzhiki: istoriia natsional’noi tragedii*. Dushanbe, 2008. P. 51.

<sup>134</sup> Rzehak. *Vom Persischen*. P. xi.

<sup>135</sup> Bert Fragner. *Die “Persophonie”: Regionalität, Identität und Sprachkontakt in der Geschichte Asiens*. Berlin, 1999. Cited in Rzehak. *Vom Persischen*. P. xi.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Rzehak. *Vom Persischen*. P. xi.

## ***Conclusion***

Ironically, the Aryan myth in Tajikistan – a product of imperial social sciences that was thoroughly rooted in the imperial context – became most forcefully expressed during the 1920s heyday of Soviet anti-imperialism. From an argument legitimizing Russian imperial rule in the region it evolved into a myth of Tajik national identity and origin. A major proponent of this myth, Aleksandr Semenov, embodies its dialectic of continuity and radically changed meaning as he himself played an important role in the region both before and after 1917, albeit in a somewhat changed capacity. In the 1920s, he would use the purely speculative concept of Aryan origins much more blatantly than he had done before 1917 in order to consolidate discursively the blurry and contested Tajik national identity. In doing so, Semenov performed several roles simultaneously, including as an expert in the service of the newly established Tajik government and as a scholar with a research agenda of his own. Even in the latter capacity his motivation for promoting the Tajik Aryan myth was manifold. On the one hand, he had a strong Persophile bias and conceptual worldview. On the other, he pragmatically strived to secure the official recognition of and government funding for his research interests in Persianate Central Asia.

The political effect of Semenov's portrayal of the Tajiks as the descendants of the Aryan aborigines of Central Asia and the victims of predominantly Turkic conquerors was the legitimization of both late imperial and early Soviet rule over territories that are part of present-day Tajikistan. To be sure, the Aryan hypothesis was not Semenov's single-handed invention.<sup>138</sup> But due to his unique sociopolitical role in the 1920s, he gave this hypothesis a powerful impetus from his position as a scholarly authority officially recognized by the regime. In doing so, Semenov served as a medium through which a seemingly anti-Marxist concept was transferred into the early Soviet period. Moreover, during the 1920s, he employed the Aryan theme in a particularly racialized manner not typical of his own earlier work. This version of the Aryan myth conflated race and language in order to categorize the Tajiks as Iranians and differentiate them from various categories of Turkic peoples of Central Asia. In doing so, he helped to essentialize the contested

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<sup>138</sup> The scholar and traveler Armin Vambery (1832–1913) had already documented exactly the same narrative in 1868. According to him, some of those who were called Tajiks were uncomfortable with that name, deeming it to be an “expression of contempt with which the Oezbeg [Uzbek] conquerors regard the subdued aborigines.” See Armin Vambery. *Sketches of Central Asia: Additional Chapters on My Travels, Adventures, and on the Ethnology of Central Asia*. London, 1868. P. 334.

Tajik national identity and, by the same token, to legitimize the establishment of the Tajik state. One of the most influential Tajik intellectuals, the late Mohamadjon Shakuri, explicitly mentioned Semenov and Bartol'd as having been among the Russian scholars who "spoke out in defense of the Tajik people" during the early 1920s.<sup>139</sup>

The degree to which Semenov actually was a champion of the Tajik national cause is an open question. It is worth bearing in mind that he acted under immense political pressure and as a representative of what he most likely regarded as the successor to the Russian empire. Thomas Trautmann has described the British Sanskritists as "empire loyalists ... for whom the relation of their intellectual work to the governance of India was by no means concealed or shamefaced."<sup>140</sup> Semenov, too, was an empire loyalist who facilitated imperial Russian and Soviet rule in Central Asia. But he was also a scholar who made use of the little leeway he had to act in his own personal and professional interests and, as such, an advocate of the preservation and study of Persianate culture. The notion of the Tajiks' Aryan descent was – like that of race – an unquestioned and underlying assumption in his work, which otherwise was primarily concerned with culture. He reacted to the perceived threat of the marginalization of Persianate culture in early Soviet Central Asia by emphasizing and connecting the cultural argument with the political discourse of Tajik national self-determination, which may or may not be a purely tactical device.

We can conclude with more certainty that Semenov's career, his handling of the Aryan myth, and his engagement with politics were influenced by the local dynamics of the NTD and had grown out of experience of studying and ruling Central Asia during the late imperial period.

## SUMMARY

This article examines the intellectual genealogy of a central tenet of contemporary nationalist discourse in Tajikistan, namely, the Aryan myth as the idea of the Tajiks' Aryan descent. The origins of this myth are discovered in Late Imperial Russia. Over the first decades of the twentieth century, through the early Soviet period, the Tajik Aryan myth would transform from a narrative legitimizing Russian imperial rule to a myth of Tajik national identity. The article shows how Tajikistan's imagining and formation as a nation-state was inextricably linked to the Aryan myth and

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<sup>139</sup> Mohammadjon Shakuri. *Panturkizm va sarnavishti todzhikon*. Dushanbe, 2010. P. 132.

<sup>140</sup> Trautmann. *Aryans and British India*. P. 19.

to the way it was articulated by imperial scholars-turned-Soviet orientalists, such as Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Semenov (1873–1958). Taking the microhistorical perspective of a single life allows the author to highlight the local Central Asian dynamics of the complex imperial situation that paved the way to and accompanied Bolshevik nationalities policy. As a scholar with a certain political weight, Semenov managed to exploit the leeway for action in accordance with his own research interests (rather than acting as a mere instrument of the imperial and Soviet regimes in Central Asia). Consequently, the article argues that the process of delimiting borders and identities in 1920s Central Asia was influenced not only by Moscow-based Bolsheviks and leading Central Asian Muslim political figures but also by Russian orientalists as distinctive historical actors.

#### **РЕЗЮМЕ**

В статье исследуется интеллектуальная генеалогия центрального элемента современного националистического дискурса в Таджикистане: “арийского мифа” как представления об арийском происхождении таджиков. Истоки этого мифа обнаруживаются в позднеимперской России. На протяжении первых десятилетий XX в., в раннесоветский период, таджикский арийский миф трансформировался из нарратива легитимации российского имперского господства в миф о таджикской национальной идентичности. В статье показывается, как изобретение и создание Таджикистана как национального государства было неразрывно связано с арийским мифом, во многом обязанным своим появлением А. А. Семенову (1873–1958), имперскому ученому, ставшему ведущим советским востоковедом. Микроисторический подход и фокус на истории жизни конкретного человека позволили автору реконструировать местную среднеазиатскую динамику многогранной имперской ситуации, которая проложила дорогу большевистской национальной политике и во многом предопределила ее. Как ученый, обладающий определенным политическим влиянием, Семенов сумел склонить неустойчивую ситуацию в направлении, наиболее отвечающем его личным научным интересам (вместо того, чтобы действовать в качестве инструмента в руках имперского или советского режима в Средней Азии). В итоге, в статье делается вывод о том, что размежевание национальных границ и идентичностей в Средней Азии 1920-х гг. происходило под влиянием не только центральной большевистской власти и местных среднеазиатских мусульманских лидеров, но и российских востоковедов как самостоятельного исторического фактора.